

R 111354Z JUL 96  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5197  
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
AMEMBASSY LONDON  
GCC COLLECTIVE  
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM  
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV  
AMEMBASSY PARIS  
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 002696

LONDON FOR TUELLER; PARIS FOR ALLEGGRONE

E.O.12958: DECL: 07/11/06

TAGS: PGOV PREL SA

SUBJECT: THE SAUDI KING: FIT TO REIGN, NOT TO RULE

REF: RIYADH 2349 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY CHARGE D'AFFAIRES THEODORE  
KATTOUF: 1.5 B, D.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: THE KING'S RECENT MEDICAL AND POLITICAL COMEBACK, EVIDENCED IN HIS SUSTAINED CHAIRING OF THE WEEKLY COUNCIL OF MINISTERS SESSIONS AND HIS SUBSTANTIVE ENGAGEMENTS WITH HIGH-LEVEL VISITORS, IS PROOF OF FAHD'S CAPACITY TO REIGN. WHILE FRENCH AND BRITISH VISITORS LEFT THEIR MEETINGS WITH THE KING SURPRISED BY THE EXTENT OF HIS RECOVERY, THEY POINT TO FAHD'S REDUCED STAMINA, IMPAIRED MENTAL AGILITY, AND IMMOBILITY AS NATURAL LIMITS ON HIS ABILITY TO RULE IN A DAY-TO-DAY CAPACITY. THE KING'S IMPROVED HEALTH OBVIATES ANY RETURN TO AN ABDULLAH REGENCY, BUT WILL NOT REVERSE THE GRADUAL ACCRETION OF AUTHORITY BY THE CROWN PRINCE AND MINDEF SULTAN. END SUMMARY

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THE COMEBACK KING  
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¶3. (C) DEFYING THE PREDICTIONS OF SOME WITHIN HIS MEDICAL ENTOURAGE, THE KING IS ENJOYING A MEDICAL AND POLITICAL COMEBACK. DATING FROM HIS JUNE 8 RECEPTION OF OMAN'S SULTAN QABOOS, FAHD'S PUBLIC APPEARANCES HAVE GROWN IN NUMBER AND IN CONSEQUENCE. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, FAHD IS CHAIRING THE WEEKLY COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETING AND HIS RECEPTION OF FOREIGN V.I.P.'S HAS EVOLVED FROM PERFUNCTORY "DROP-BY'S" TO ENGAGEMENTS OF POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE. THE KING'S LEVEL OF ACTIVITY SUGGESTS THAT THERE WILL BE NO IMMINENT RESUMPTION OF THE CROWN PRINCE'S REGENCY. HOWEVER, RECENT WESTERN VISITORS HAVE DRAWN SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE KING'S MENTAL AND PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES.

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RIFKIND ON FAHD: ONE TRACK MIND  
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¶4. (C) THE BRITISH READ-OUT ON FAHD'S HEALTH, FOLLOWING FOREIGN MINISTER RIFKIND'S JULY 1 MEETING WITH THE KING (REFTEL), CLOSELY PARALLELS OUR ASSESSMENT OF FAHD DURING SECDEF PERRY'S JUNE 29 VISIT. CAPABLE OF GOING BEYOND PROTOCOL AND OF HANDLING A FOCUSED SUBSTANTIVE EXCHANGE, FAHD IS NEVERTHELESS NOTICEABLY MORE FREQUENTLY REPETITIVE AND "LESS SHARP." U.K. AMBASSADOR ANDREW GREEN RELATED TO CHARGE THAT, IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION POSED BY RIFKIND, FAHD WAS UNABLE TO SHIFT GEARS AND ADDRESS A TOPIC UNRELATED TO HIS PRIMARY AGENDA. IN THE AWKWARD PAUSE WHICH ENSUED, THE DELEGATION WAS QUICKLY SUMMONED TO A DINNER HOSTED BY FOREIGN MINISTER SAUD AL-FAYSAL. THE KING APPEARED TO THE BRITISH OBSERVERS TO BE IN REASONABLY GOOD PHYSICAL CONDITION, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

FRENCH TAKE: MENTALLY ENGAGED, PHYSICALLY DIMINISHED

¶5. (C) ACCORDING TO FRENCH EMBASSY COUNSELOR PAUL ORTHOLAN, CHIRAC AND HIS DELEGATION WERE SURPRISED BY THE KING'S LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT THE JULY 6-8 VISIT. FAHD WAS PRESENT AT THE AIRPORT, STANDING ON THE TARMAC IN THE STIFLING JEDDAH HEAT AS CHIRAC'S PLANE LANDED. WHILE THE ARRIVAL CEREMONY WAS TRUNCATED (E.G., NO NATIONAL ANTHEMS) IN ORDER TO REDUCE THE KING'S TIME ON HIS FEET AND HIS EXPOSURE TO THE HEAT, FAHD DROVE WITH CHIRAC TO THE GUEST PALACE AND LATER IN THE EVENING HOSTED A DINNER, FOLLOWED BY A 90 MINUTE BILATERAL WHICH INCLUDED A 15 MINUTE TETE-A-TETE BETWEEN FAHD AND THE FRENCH PRESIDENT. AT THE CONCLUSION OF CHIRAC'S VISIT, FAHD DROVE WITH CHIRAC TO THE AIRPORT AND SAW HIM OFF.

¶6. (C) WHILE THE KING REPEATED HIMSELF FREQUENTLY IN HIS DINNER AND BILATERAL DISCUSSIONS, CHIRAC AND HIS PARTY VIEWED THIS MORE AS AN ARAB MANNERISM, THAN A MANIFESTATION OF HIS NOVEMBER 1995 STROKE. ORTHOLAN NOTED THAT THE EXCHANGES FOCUSED ON THE PEACE PROCESS, WITH LONG KINGLY DIGRESSIONS INTO PRIOR SAG INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE PEACE IN THE REGION, BUT THAT WITHIN THIS CONVERSATIONAL ORBIT, FAHD WAS FULLY ABREAST OF THE CAIRO SUMMIT, THE G-7 LYON STATEMENT, AND THE EU FLORENCE COMMUNIQUE. ON THE WHOLE, ORTHOLAN REPORTED, KING FAHD APPEARED IN BETTER MENTAL SHAPE THAN THEY HAD BEEN LED TO BELIEVE.

¶7. (C) HOWEVER, ORTHOLAN EMPHASIZED, CHIRAC WAS STRUCK BY THE KING'S PHYSICAL DETERIORATION. (NOTE: CHIRAC IS THE FIRST WESTERN OBSERVER TO HAVE VIEWED THE KING IN ACTION OVER A SUSTAINED PERIOD OF TIME. TYPICALLY THE KING HAS GREETED VISITORS STANDING IN A RECEPTION HALL, BUT HAS NOT BEEN SEEN OR TELEvised WALKING.) FAHD APPEARED TO BE ALMOST CRIPPLED, ORTHOLAN REPORTED, AND WALKED WITH "TREMENDOUS" DIFFICULTY, HUNCHEd OVER, USING A CANE, AND SUPPORTED ON EITHER SIDE BY AN AIDE. AT THE END OF THE DINNER, FAHD REQUIRED ASSISTANCE IN STANDING UP. FOLLOWING THE 90 MINUTE BILATERAL, THE KING WAS UNABLE TO RISE AND CHIRAC LENT A HAND IN ASSISTING FAHD TO A WHEELCHAIR. THE FRENCH DELEGATION DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF FAHD'S DARK SUNGLASSES, WHICH HE WORE THROUGHOUT THE DINNER AND SUBSEQUENT MEETING.

COMMENT: A REIGNING MONARCH

¶8. (C) FAHD'S APPARENT RECOVERY IS SUFFICIENT TO QUELL DOUBTS AS TO HIS ABILITY TO REIGN. HIS CAPACITY TO RULE, HOWEVER, APPEARS TRUNCATED. REDUCED STAMINA, IMPAIRED MENTAL AGILITY, AND IMMObILITY WILL DELIMIT FAHD'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE DAY-TO-DAY AFFAIRS OF STATE. THUS, WHILE THE KING APPEARS TO HAVE RECOVERED SUBSTANTIALLY FROM HIS STROKE LAST NOVEMBER, IT IS ALSO CLEARQ, HE QIKELY TO COMPLETELY REGAIN HIS EARLIER FORM EITHER MENTALLY OR PHYSICALLY. CONSEQUENTLY, WE ANTICIPATE THAT THE CROWN PRINCE AND MINDEF SULTAN WILL CONTINUE TO FILL THE WIDE GAPS LEFT BY THE KING'S REDUCED ABILITY TO MANAGE SAUDI DECISION-MAKING.

KATTOUF